

# Ukraine: The Epicenter of Hybrid Warfare and Ways to Win There

\*Presentation subject of forthcoming *Strategy Bridge* article

Views are the author's and do not represent official NDU, DOD, or USG positions

# Core of hybrid warfare (NATO Defense College 2015-2018)

“Hybrid Warfare exploits the political seams [between states] and social seams within open societies... Russia’s use of hybrid warfare is both strategic and ambitious.”

“Russia’s adoption of hybrid warfare is the product of a combination of strategic opportunity... to pursue and achieve policy objectives of the highest importance through active, but calibrated employment of *mostly\** non-military means, together with the necessity to avoid a highly destructive, and potentially decisive, use of force by an adversary.”

*\*That can change with escalation potential shown in Kerch attack*

“Russia’s offensive non-linear warfare paradigm would be penetration.\*”

*\*Although conquest remains a viable option*

# “Full range of different modes of warfare...” (F. Hoffman *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2007)

Multiple modalities across regular and irregular warfare that target

- Pillars of government

*Supports & visible structures of legitimacy*

- Depths of society

*Historical bedrock & diverse layers that change over time*

- Breadth of foreign relations

*Dom-Intl & overlapping/intersecting networks across and beyond them*

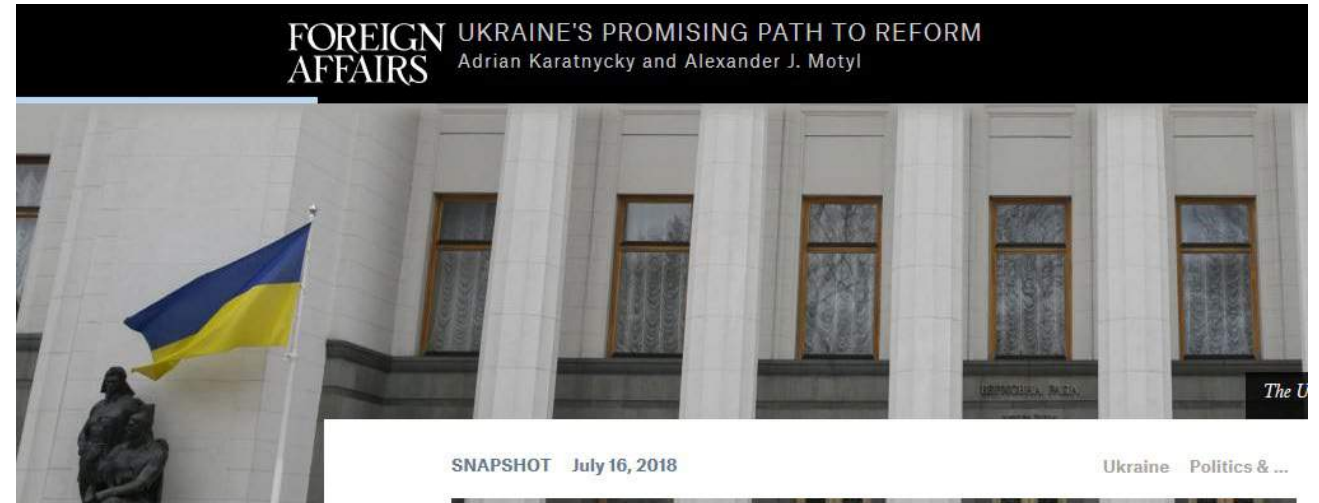
Ukraine is well aware of these even as the rest of the West awakens to them...

# Start with perspectives

How the Kremlin views the situation – Western weakness



But is that really the key reference point?



## Ukraine's Promising Path to Reform

A Narrow Focus on Corruption Overlooks Remarkable Progress

By *Adrian Karatnycky and Alexander J. Motyl*

# Perspective shapes possibilities

Russia up close is daunting

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# Neighborhood view...

The Great Bear fills one's vision



# The vast reach of the state means...

Terror inspires “invincibility”



Soviet Gulag Locations



Lubyanka

# Eurasia's resources seem limitless...

Third largest timber exporter



Only recently surpassed by US as global leader in oil production, #2 arms sales

Mir Diamond Mine: largest man-made hole on Earth, 1/4 of all diamonds at peak production





# Yet for all its strengths, Russia is not complicated

“Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. But perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”

Winston Churchill (London 1939)

- Russia is very simple with simple interests

Mafia State & Expansionist Empire = tyranny that only understands strength

“Nothing has changed in Russia’s policy.... Her methods, her tactics, her maneuvers may change, but the pole star—world domination—is immutable.”

Karl Marx (London 1867)

# Historic Russian hybrid warfare approach

- Key method: *Personnel placement*  
*What they say / where they stand matters less than who they are – Moscow’s “man”*
- Regional economic integration/penetration: *maximize and highlight problems*  
*Challenges of investment climate*  
*Scarcity of domestic capital*
- Global lawfare: *bend the truth even if it breaks*  
*Manipulate existing vagaries in international agreements to violate the “spirit of the law” while appearing to keep its letter*
- Universal cost-free narrative pandering: *flood market with direct & indirect messages*  
*Words are cheap even in seller’s market because everyone is buying something & enough credible problems to exploit*
- All of this gives the appearance of being everywhere, doing everything  
*Core Russian goal in influence = pervasive ∴ irresistible power*

# Ukraine is the linchpin to empire

Russian perspective:

- Myth of Russified Kyven Rus (despite Kyiv as regional hub centuries before Moscow)
- Part of Slavic heartland (breakaway more painful than Baltics, Caucasus, CAS)

- Post-Yanukovych threatened loss of Crimea

*Historic entryway to the Med and beyond*

*Helps make Russia more than a regional power*

*Current power projection*

*Sevastopol – warm water port, core strategic assets, force projection*

*Azov mineral/natural gas*

*Petropolitics – need to blunt south stream pipeline*

# Putin played his queen to regain linchpin

Full-spectrum seen in Ukraine

- Conventional forces

*Weapons testing, ties to Syria operations – T90s, counterbattery, EW...*

*Unconventional uses – UAV bombs outside ATO (Donbas)*

- Special Operations – beyond little green men...

*Night Wolves motorcycle “clubs”*

*Fascists ↔ Democratic Civil Activists*

- Influence

*Presidential candidates ↔ gumming up local governance (overloading Kyiv citizen petition websites)*

*Information dominance – worse than it appears because NO ONE is a trusted agent*

*Credible cyber threats reinforce perceptions of Ukraine’s weakness to prevent*

- Method – use civil society opportunities & R2P “responsibilities”

- Goal – destabilize from within → defeat democratic & independent Ukraine

# Ukraine epicenter as hybrid warfare laboratory

Hybrid warfare there spreads threats to periphery

- Baltic open-society vulnerabilities and easily manipulated ethnic Russian grievances  
*E-residency; Narva & Visaginis (east), Klaipeda (west)*
- Kerch escalation to maritime law and Geneva Convention violations sets precedent  
*Lithuania (staged “justification” for Kaliningrad land bridge)?*  
*Poland (Russian EEZ expands further into Gdansk-Klaipeda transit)?*

Applies to Great Power Competition by undermining legitimacy of

- Democracy itself – Ukraine’s democratic “chaos” reinforces need for strong leader  
*Use of political proxies turn voters into puppets... partners? (Turkey, Bosnian Serbs, Bulgaria?)*
- US as democratic great power– if Ukraine falls, so will partner confidence elsewhere  
*21<sup>st</sup> century dominos highly vulnerable in hybrid warfare*

# Good news: epicenter position has advantages despite its dangers

Ukraine knows Russia, but Russia does not have the same expertise

- Kremlin's narrow vision proved sufficient after Orange Revolution
- But failed leading up to, during, and after Revolution of Dignity

Putin's war has potential to make Ukraine his worst enemy

- Ukrainian political identity being forged out of invasion of Crimea, crucible of Donbas, expanded threats in Azov Sea, threats to Mariupol and beyond
- In-group mobilization potential increasing vis-à-vis increasingly "other" Russia
- New identity crosses artificial "ethnic" divides, encompasses language differences
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church vital symbol of independence

# Vulnerabilities to Russian strategy

## 1) Recognition of Ukraine's tremendous geostrategic importance

- *“Russia can be either an empire or a democracy, but it cannot be both... Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.” Zbigniew Brzezinski, US National Security Advisor (1977-1981)*
- Shows a clear location to defend in otherwise amorphous hybrid warfare

## 2) Recognition of Russia's core limits

- Despite myth, Russia is not eternal  
*Demographic time bomb – projected nearly 1/3 population decline in 30 years*
- Central state not invulnerable  
*Factions exist within silovki, between regions, among economic rivals*  
*\*With the right push → more akin to Byzantine infighting than glorious “3<sup>rd</sup> Rome” Moscow imagines*
- Identity is not impervious to change  
*Catchall Compatriot Policy creates space for alternative Russian identities... sybirak*

# Inherent vulnerabilities of hybrid warfare itself apply to Russian approach

Hybrid Warfare does not give either side inherent advantage

Its logic = *persistent opportunism for simplistic long-term goals*

Therefore the means to achieve them will vary, but the ways are the same

- Exploit vulnerabilities to create linkage and leverage
- Expand “chess board” and pieces that can be played

*Next thing you know, you’re fighting a wizard and a tank beside pawns and bishops*

*So turn the tables...*



# Capitalizing on Putin's error (Ukraine StratCom)

The war he started will not end the way he planned

- “War has a momentum of its own and it carries you away from all thoughtful intentions when you get into it... You know where you began. You never know where you are going to end.” George Kennan (2002)
- *Maidan and Donbas forging Ukrainian national political identity – not making Ukrainians serfs*

Strategic Communication in Ukraine is KEY

- No free advertising of Russian expertise
  - Russia punches above its weight class as a good fighter in intelligence and security services but Narrative of Russian agents as “everyone and everywhere” fuels FSB mythology*
- Instead highlight Russia has serious weaknesses
  - Manpower, resourcing, scope of terrain → force it to be asymmetric while maintaining much costlier conventional arsenal*

# Opportunities to support victory in Ukraine

Russian economic penetration limited by real & abiding domestic and international constraints

- OPEC & Russia can no longer dictate commodities market v-a-v US
- EU divisions on priorities & vulnerabilities actually constrain uniform Russian action

*Nordics, Baltics, Poles // Germany, France, Italy*

Lawfare = NEVER-ENDING so Russia cannot win, only obfuscate truth

Fighting lie with truth & action

- NC Local Hurricane Rumor Control <https://www.fema.gov/florence-rumors>
- EU Mythbuster Task Force <https://www.newsweek.com/eu-launch-mythbusters-taskforce-counter-russian-propaganda-315480>



# Show that words do have costs

Alternative messaging in “post-truth” hybrid warfare

Highlight Kremlin’s mistakes, not its lies “Putin falling off the tiger”

- More sting operations like Babchenko = incompetence

Highlight for all to see the dark places Putin wishes would stay hidden

- Soviet Gulags = Russian police state [http://www.sunray22b.net/gulags\\_in\\_pictures.htm](http://www.sunray22b.net/gulags_in_pictures.htm)
- Russian Occupant <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GN0w9W8hq1I> VS  
Reality of Occupation – Holodomor, Kazakh birth defects, radioactive waste

Tap into Ukrainian entrepreneurial spirit and culture

- Ukrainian National Political Identity  
*As much political culture as social capital – building democracy together*

Doing so operationalizes everything in Hybrid Defense



# Others recognize Ukraine's strengths

Despite inflation and a host of challenges...

World Bank (2017) *Ukraine Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Diagnostic*

“Ukraine has improved its business environment and has significant strengths in a well-educated workforce. A relatively large and growing market, abundant resources, and low costs at current exchange rates all favor foreign investments that will support innovation.”



Nataliya Nichoga (Lviv), owner of YuON – with new equipment purchased with an EU4Business loan for EU market

# Resilience as inoculation

Key for Ukrainian governance vis-à-vis Russian countergov = building resilience

Inoculate population against Russian info ops → reduce influence

*Not about TV stations, radio or internet*

*Although access is key part*

## **Core is about Message and Method**

*Setting the terms = reclaim the strategic initiative*

*Ukrainian “facebook”, National Guard funded films (military most respected institution)*

**Strategic Communication is THE KEY** – Naming and Claiming

Occupy space in the narrative landscape – “Maidan” messaging

*Identify ideas, symbols, histories and stake the Ukrainian flag there*

Define interpretation, meaning, and significance – need domestic “UNIAN”

<https://www.unian.info/>



# Governance messaging – flood info space

“What we are doing...

Well,

Not so well,

Failing,

To improve needed areas

“What we are not doing and why not”

Some “dirty laundry” but with reasonable explanation

*Maximize effort*

*Minimize blame*

CORE = managing the message, not reacting to it

Example: Reform Progress Monitoring 2016

# Elephant in the room: corruption... but

Competing definitions across academia, public policy, country-specific approaches

- Formal vs informal politics

- Networks vs nepotism

Competing measures applied in the real world

- Inevitability of some “under the table” vs is it normal and necessary?

- “Paying not to steal more” effective method vs autonomous accountability agency

  - Challenges of creating, staffing, running, overseeing NABU*

Competing practices to get stuff done

- Taxation → goods and services for all, some, few

- Contracting open bids vs inside information/contacts

Bottom line = measures are debatable, perception is reality, so...

# Main challenge is not corruption itself

Perception of corruption = far more damaging

It fundamentally undermines legitimacy

*Illegitimacy shrinks ability to put governance capacity into action*

*Illegitimacy diminishes recognition of and support for governance autonomy*

Legitimacy can be based in facts, but often based in “feelings”

Narratives, symbols, rhetoric as STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION reinforce them

Negative sparring, mutual recrimination keeps debate in the mud

Overwhelming evidence voters don't want negative adds

*Shaping tone as much as message part of effective and responsive governance*



# Samples of SOF support to governance

## Civil Military Engagement

- Resilience

Military Information Support Team

*Cooperation with host nation StratCom*

CIMIC

*Cooperation with civilian infrastructure agencies*

- Resistance

G Force, Auxiliary – Local governance/society exercises for “worst-case”

*Lithuania – Mobilization and Civil Resistance Department (MoI-MoD)*

*Estonia – Women’s Volunteer Defense Organization (Estonian Defense League)*

*Sweden – Civil Contingencies Agency “If Crisis Or War Comes” pamphlet*

# Every Russian strength presents opportunity

Resistance  $\leftrightarrow$  resilience

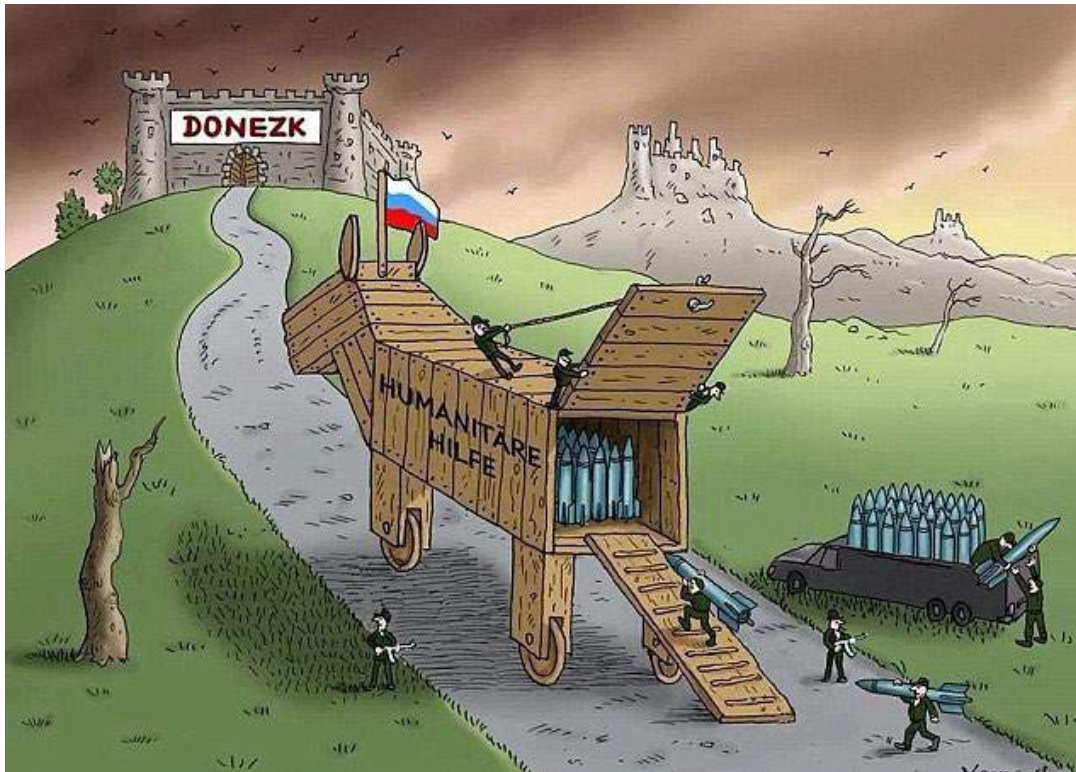


VS



# Counter deceit with stealth

*Hybrid warfare creates asymmetric advantages on the battlefield*



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Small Unit Tactics  
Strategic Reconnaissance  
Unconventional Warfare  
Governance Support  
Messaging  
FID, SFA

# Revolution of Dignity more than a symbol

Democracy is in Ukraine's blood because Ukrainian blood has been spilled for it

*The very presence of democracy in Ukraine is a defeat for Russia*



# Ukraine's unique geopolitical / historical position

“No people in history have ever survived who thought they could protect their freedom by making themselves inoffensive to their enemies... Greatness is a quality of character and is not the result of circumstances.” Dean Acheson US Secretary of State 1949-1953

*More than any other country Ukraine can be thorn in Russia's side and rise from the ashes to greatness as democratic success story*